



CHAPTER  
  
EIGHTEEN

**B**ut come down I did, and faster than I would have ever believed possible. The Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah, which had been embraced so quickly by the Pope, would be the hardest creative challenge I ever undertook. It became my full-time preoccupation from the moment I left the podium in Denver in August 1993.

Already the previous year, I had encountered obstacles to this seemingly purely virtuous initiative. The Vatican had chosen a winter 1993 date for the concert and then made a singular, initial private inquiry to Rav Elio Toaff, the Chief Rabbi of Rome. The Rabbi, who was a true friend of the Pope, was the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of Rome, which had been in continuous existence since well before the fall of the Roman Empire. The Rome Synagogue's liturgical rite is thought to be the closest form of Jewish observance to that which the apostles of Jesus himself would have known. The Great Synagogue, a nineteenth-century edifice, stands not more than a mile from the Vatican. In 1986, Rav Toaff had officially invited Pope John Paul II to make the historic first visit of any pope to any synagogue in the world. As it has been said, it took two thousand years for any Roman pontiff to make this journey of less than a mile across the Tiber. Now, eight years later, the Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah would be the Pope's return invitation to this great Rabbi to join him in the sacred sphere of the Vatican.



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During the planning stages of the Shoah concert, I had made it a point to pay my great respects to Rav Toaff. I wanted him to come to know the person who had initiated this unprecedented Vatican event. The Chief Rabbi had to believe that the concert we were planning would be deeply respectful of the victims of the Holocaust, Italians and non-Italians alike. And he had to know that it was greatly hoped by all concerned that he would play a historic role as the Jewish personage who would represent our people alongside His Holiness before the world on this occasion.

When I entered his office, up the stairs, just behind the sanctuary of his synagogue, Rav Toaff greeted me with warmth, kindness, and just a hint of suspicion. He was then a man in his late seventies, with a scholarly mien, and a goateed, wizened face that had seen more than its share of the terrible tragedy that humankind is capable of inflicting on itself. He addressed me in Italian, asking simply, “How is it, Maestro, that you come to know the Pope? Our community is a bit anxious about this proposed Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah. Please do tell me about it, so I can, I hope, allay their fears.”

“You know, Rabbi,” I said, “the story of my knowing the Pope is a strange one. I am not surprised that you have questions. In a way, so do I. But I think the best way for me to tell you is to say I think it was somehow fated. I went to Kraków in 1987 to conduct the Philharmonic Orchestra there. I had never met a Catholic priest in my life before that time. And the next thing I know, I am sitting in the Pope’s private library in the Vatican, talking about music, about Kraków, and about the Jewish people.”

Rav Toaff leaned back in his chair. He looked at me for a very long time. His face softened just a bit, but the pain never left his eyes. They had seen too much of the pain of the world for that, I supposed.

“Yes, Poland ... Kraków ... Now I understand. Someone told me you conducted the concert in honor of the Pope’s tenth anniversary. They said that they saw it on television. But your story, this I am hearing for the first time. So you have actually met the Pope several times? And this concert for the Shoah, I have been told it was your idea?”

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“Yes,” I answered. “The Pope has treated me with great respect, and has helped me so much with my work in Kraków. He even assisted with a concert I conducted in the beautiful Templ Synagogue in Kraków. And it was after that that I had this idea of performing a Shoah concert here in Rome. One to which we could invite the Pope. But it was the Pope who changed that. It was he who decided to make it a Papal event in the Vatican. I hope very much you will be able to come and that you will bring your congregation with you. Without you, the concert would not have the right meaning. As I have been told by the Vatican, without your presence we cannot go forward.”

“Maestro, I will communicate with the Vatican,” Rav Toaff said finally. “When the time is appropriate, they will have my answer. But now at least I understand much better what this is about. Thank you most kindly for coming to see me. Maestro, *buona giornata*.”

Rav Toaff seemed to me to be a very cautious man but also a man capable of great things. His historic invitation to Pope John Paul to visit his synagogue was proof enough of that. But he was wise as well. He would need to have his community with him when he crossed the river to visit the Holy See.

This great Rabbi surprised everyone but His Holiness, therefore, when he demurred, saying he would not be able to attend the concert scheduled for January 27, 1993. He would unfortunately not be able to accept this most gracious Papal invitation, he said, because the concert had been scheduled for Saturday evening at 6:30. Even though, in January, this would be a full hour after sundown, the official conclusion of the Shabbat observance so important to the Roman Jewish community's Orthodox congregation, Rav Toaff noted that this would be too late. Although the Rabbi could imagine that a special motorcade might well be provided to him and his closest aides so that they could easily be in their places at the appointed hour, this would not be true for his congregants who lived scattered throughout all of Rome. Many of them, he asserted, would undoubtedly be stuck in the thick of Roman traffic, unable to reach the concert on time. In addition, tightened security had become an unfortunate part of the routine

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surrounding Papal events since the assassination attempt on John Paul in 1981. With this, there might well be a large crowd of very disappointed Jews with, God forbid, Holocaust survivors among them, left waiting outside the Vatican gates while the Holy See's commemoration of one of the greatest tragedies in human history took place inside without them.

There were those in the Vatican who saw Rav Toaff's negative reply as an opportunity to allow the project to fade away. One Vatican official said to me, "Oh, Maestro, we are so sorry that your Rabbi has decided not to come. But it was a wonderful idea, wasn't it?" But the Pope did not agree. He knew that what the Rabbi had said was true. He also had much too much respect for Rav Toaff not to be sensitive to whatever other issues might be behind this decision. In the end, His Holiness wished Rav Toaff to come, with all his congregants, in wholehearted support of the goal of reconciliation that this Vatican concert promised. The Pope would wait patiently for the Rabbi to be able to say yes.

As testament to his belief in a positive outcome, the Pope asked me immediately to find another date that would be completely free of any foreseeable complications. One which would prove to one and all that Rav Toaff was sincerely interested in grasping the hand that the Pope had offered him. The Rabbi just needed a bit of time to make sure that he was not alone.

Once again, John Paul's wisdom and his powerful understanding of the human heart proved true. I put forward a new date, April 7, 1994, a Thursday, and not coincidentally the exact date of the international Jewish commemoration of Yom Ha-Shoah—Holocaust Memorial Day. No sooner had the "official" Papal invitation gone out than Rav Toaff replied right away in the affirmative. He would come, and he would bring his congregation with him to this historic Papal Concert. Whatever persuading the great Rav Toaff needed to do inside his own community was well rewarded. His wisdom would be heeded in the end.

So now the concert date was set. The Pope and the Chief Rabbi would attend, and the Vatican could go forward with all that was

needed to make this the grand occasion that every Papal event so naturally becomes.

The only thing left was, well, everything else!

Would any survivors from outside of Rome be willing to come to the Vatican on that April day? Would the major Jewish organizations worldwide give the event their blessing and would their leaders, like Rav Toaff, also grace this historic Pontifical act with their presence? In other words, would there be a positive answer among Jews worldwide to the Pope's earnest, heartfelt question: "If I do this, will there be a Jewish hand to meet ours when it is outstretched?"

Beyond all this, as an artist, I was by now just six short months before the Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah, going to be standing completely alone on the platform, conducting in the air in front of the thousands who would crowd the Sala Nervi and the millions more who would be watching on television around the world. I had no orchestra, no choir, no soloists. I had an empty slate that needed to be filled with musicians of the highest caliber for what would surely be the most historic day of my artistic life. My plate suddenly became very full, and the responsibility placed on my shoulders by the Pope began to register its awesome weight.

The world Jewish community's response was tepid at best. Relations between it and the Vatican in those years before formal diplomatic recognition between Israel and the Holy See were often rocky. And the Shoah was the most sensitive subject of all. Added to this was the little matter that none of these Jewish community heavyweights had any idea who I was. Who was this conductor who was now approaching them with this fantastical tale about a Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah? They were Rav Toaff times 50. *Skeptical* is much too mild a word for their reaction.

Up until that time, few in the Jewish community had heard my name. Mine was a professional reputation, not a religious one. Perhaps some of these heads of major organizations had seen the *New York Times* or *Newsweek* articles or the network television reports about my appointment to Kraków. There had been many of those, and not in the cultural pages alone. Perhaps they had seen the broadcasts of my

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first Papal Concert in honor of Pope John Paul's tenth anniversary, which had aired repeatedly in the years since the concert was first shown in 1988. Still, even if they had known who I was, a symphony conductor with a Kraków connection to the Pope, these heads of the most powerful Jewish organizations in the world had their own entrée to the Vatican. They all knew Cardinal Cassidy. They all had been working in the vineyards of relations between the Vatican and the Jews for years. It didn't compute that I would be bringing them word of such an audacious step forward in the carefully scripted high-level Vatican-Jewish dialogue, to which only they were supposed to be privy.

So the reaction of virtually all of the heads of the major Jewish organizations—the World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and on and on—was uniformly negative. Even Miles Lerman, the head of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, whom I had met in Poland and who I thought would be intensely interested in this endeavor—even he said, “No, Gilbert, I know you are only trying to help, but the time is not right.” Miles even wrote a letter to Cardinal Cassidy to that effect, suggesting that this event be put off to some indeterminate date when the atmosphere between the Vatican and world Jewry had improved. In any case, if and when it took place, Miles thought that it should be in Washington at the Holocaust Museum, with him, of course, as the host. Cardinal Cassidy showed me this letter, gently trying to persuade me that this concert, however well-meaning, would not likely be met with a positive reception in the worldwide Jewish community.

I told the good Cardinal, with whom I was by now on fairly close terms, that it was not up to me. I was at the Vatican's disposal. As far as I knew, His Holiness continued to be strongly supportive, and I was communicating every response to Monsignor Dziwisz, who was of course only guided by the Pope's wish, whatever that might be. His Eminence seemed unconvinced.

It is my understanding, confirmed later in a conversation by Cardinal Cassidy himself, that he had approached His Holiness directly with his concerns and that the Pope remained undeterred. The

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Pontiff knew in his heart that what he was doing was the right thing, and that in the end our Shoah concert would surely be a great success.

It was incredible to me that the Pope believed so strongly in my idea. He had made the event so much larger by making it his own, by supporting it so stalwartly inside and outside the Vatican. Now I knew why Denver had been so important. Through his most public show of support for me, whom he and Monsignor Dziwisz called "Our Artist," he was showing the entire hierarchy of the Church his faith in me and the mission he had sent me on. It was all part of his plan. The Pope and his Maestro could show the world by their example just how powerful human understanding could be, how it could tear down the walls of hatred and suspicion, no matter how ancient and how thick those walls might seem to be.

I too continued then my search for Jewish support. It seemed a thankless task. In the end, after all my entreaties, I found not a single official organization of Holocaust survivors that would participate in what seemed to me to be an incredible Papal gesture offered solely in their honor. None.

Sometimes, though, it only takes one man.

In Kraków, some years before, I had met a one-person dynamo, a Polish Jew then living in New York named Jack Eisner. Jack had survived the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and numerous stations in the Nazi system of murder and terror, finally being freed from the Flossenbürg concentration camp in Bavaria, in 1945. On hearing the tale of this Papal Concert, Eisner offered instantly to lead the effort of gathering survivors from around the world, one by one, if need be, to join his march to the Vatican, to add their vital witness to this groundbreaking event.

Along with Jack, only one important Jewish organization heeded my call. The American Jewish Committee, encouraged by its interreligious affairs expert Rabbi James Rudin, grasped the enormity of this historic project right away. Rabbi Rudin worked tirelessly with Cardinal Cassidy on aspects of the event that only men of the cloth could possibly accomplish. The Rabbi brought the Cardinal some peace of mind by carrying the AJC's full official blessing along with

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him. In the end, Rabbi Rudin was rewarded with a place of honor, sitting in the middle of the hall, not very far from the Pope. After the AJC showed its support, so did the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultation, the IJCIC. They were the official liaison between the Vatican and the Jewish world. With this important body's assent, the Shoah concert could finally receive Cardinal Cassidy's official approval.

So now, safe in the knowledge that there would be survivors present and that the Pope's outstretched hand would indeed be met with a Jewish hand coming back, I set out to gather a circle of important artists for whom this event would have very special meaning.

My first thought for *the* appropriate orchestra was the Czech Philharmonic. Artistically, they are one of the world's top ensembles. For that reason alone it would have been a pleasure to make music with them. More specifically, they and their wartime Chief Conductor, the internationally renowned maestro Raphael Kubelik, had endured the Nazi occupation of Prague, all the while protecting their Jewish colleagues for as long as they possibly could. They had come out of the war with their honor intact. Maestro Kubelik had in fact been quite heroic. He had refused to conduct Wagner, as commanded by Prague's Nazi occupiers, during the entire period of the war. He finally fled the Czech capital after famously refusing to bark the required *Heil Hitler* at a Philharmonic concert attended by high Nazi officials.

Much more personally, the Czech Philharmonic was a great orchestra from my dear mother-in-law's, Margit Raab Kalina's, home country. She was my inspiration for this event. It would only be appropriate if her countrymen were to have the honor of performing on this historic occasion.

When I approached the management of the orchestra with this momentous invitation, they reacted positively, sending me a telegram to that effect. They did add that the orchestra's acceptance of this invitation would have to be approved by their new Chief Conductor, a German named Gerd Albrecht. It was in Herr Albrecht's contract, I was told, that such permission had to be given. The orchestra assured me, however, that they believed this would be only a formality. They



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were certain that anyone could see what a great opportunity this would be for any orchestra, even one as universally esteemed as the Czech Philharmonic.

Nothing is ever simple in the politics of the arts. No sooner was Herr Albrecht apprised of this Papal invitation than he declared that the orchestra was not free to go. They had rehearsals scheduled for an upcoming tour and would be unable to accept. Period.

I was very disappointed, as I knew many others involved would be as well. However, I was willing to move on to any one of the great orchestras I felt would jump at this chance to make musical history. But it wasn't that simple.

Many members of the Czech Philharmonic and high officials of the government of the Czech Republic did not want to let this opportunity pass them by. Players in the orchestra and government representatives pleaded with Albrecht to relent. They believed it was such a unique invitation that they in turn even raised their concerns with the President of the Czech Republic, none other than the great playwright and human rights activist Vaclav Havel. President Havel reacted with civil outrage. After initial personal entreaties to Herr Albrecht had failed, Havel went on national television to accuse the conductor of "besmirching the reputation of the Czech nation" by refusing this extraordinary Papal invitation. A German-Czech feud broke out that dug up negative feelings between the two countries, long buried in the years since World War II. The German press by and large supported Albrecht. The Czechs, by contrast, largely took President Havel's side. Herr Albrecht grew more and more incensed. He even accused the Czech secret police of bugging his phone, which was a bit out of date in 1993, three years after the "Velvet Revolution" that had rid the Czech Republic of its Communist-era secret police.

The orchestra itself was divided, some siding with Herr Albrecht, some not, and the controversy grew and grew. In the end, sadly, the Czech Philharmonic did not join us in Rome. Gerd Albrecht had won the fight. But he had lost the war. He never recovered his standing in the Czech community at large, and he resigned his post with the orchestra not long thereafter.

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Upon hearing the Czech Philharmonic's final decision, I immediately approached my next choice, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London. I called their experienced Chairman Alan Hammond, and he and his orchestra quickly accepted. In the great tradition of the London orchestras, the RPO is player-run and self-governing. The musicians themselves, through their player-run board, have a significant role in decisions about which major engagements to accept and which to decline. I couldn't have been more pleased.

The program for the concert was the next item on my artistic agenda. I have never been as daunted by the choice of musical repertoire in my entire life. How do you represent the Holocaust in music? For that is precisely what the Pope believed music could do: reach out wordlessly to bridge this age-old religious and historical divide. How do you honor the martyrdom of millions of Jewish victims and yet instill hope in the children and the children's children of those who miraculously made it through? These were questions to which I needed to find just the right answers. The wrong music, evoking horrible memories of unseen horrors, would have drastic consequences in the charged atmosphere then prevailing between Catholics and Jews.

My first thought was to perform the Adagio from the Tenth Symphony of Gustav Mahler, a single monumental movement of a planned gargantuan four-movement magnum opus. It is like the trunk of a primordial tree, whose remaining musical branches and beautifully colored, carefully detailed leaves, were never to see the light of day. This opening expanse from his Tenth was Mahler's attempt to depict in music the human encounter with our tortured existence here in this world, and his vision of a place of peace that might just possibly exist beyond. It is at once apocalyptic and resigned. I was sure this was the right work to represent the unanswerable questions that will be posed by the Holocaust to everyone forever: How could this happen? How could one group treat another as though they were not human? From what place in the mortal condition does such a horror spring?

As with every aspect of this concert, I brought my ideas back upstairs to the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. I shared my Mahler Tenth idea with Monsignor Dziwisz. He asked me to tell him

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something of this work, which he said he did not know, so that he could better present the idea to the Pope. I told him my understanding of Mahler's vision and a bit about the biography of the composer as well; in short, everything I could think of that would help him evaluate this choice. Monsignor Dziwiz asked me to come see him again after he had had a chance to speak with His Holiness.

When I next saw him, not long thereafter, Monsignor Dziwiz asked me a simple question: "Hadn't Mahler converted to Catholicism in order to become the Director of the Vienna State Opera? Maestro, far be it for us to advise you on strictly artistic matters. I am sure this is a most appropriate work for this important concert. But those days are behind us. Such religious tests are no longer part of our lives in this era. Do you think, Maestro, that this will send the right message to the Jews who might attend, especially the survivors who will be present that evening: that they be forced to convert in order to be accepted to any position in society? Again, please understand, I do not wish to interfere, but might you not be able to suggest some other work which did not come with such a history? Just for this occasion. Maestro, your repertoire is large, I know. Might you not find a less difficult choice?"

I was stunned. As wise as I knew Monsignor Dziwiz to be, this thoughtful response must clearly have come from the Pope. His Holiness' empathy for the feelings of the survivors of the Shoah was powerful. My lack of forethought about just this essential ingredient of the musical offering for that sacred evening was personally disappointing.

And he was, of course, correct. Mahler, who had been born Jewish, and had written music intensely influenced by his Jewish upbringing, had grown more and more interested in other spiritual traditions, especially Christianity. He may well have converted to Catholicism on his own at some point in his life. But the sudden decision to do so in 1897, just to meet the qualification to ascend to the most esteemed conducting position in the musical world at the time, most likely did not represent the sincere coming to Christ that the Pope would surely have warmly welcomed. And he was so right: the survivors who would gather in the Vatican's hallowed halls that coming

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April would assuredly not have seen our choice of Mahler's Tenth as the welcome for them as Jews that the Pontiff so sincerely intended.

So, Mahler was out, for that Papal Concert, at least. It would wait for its appropriate place, on another day.

A better choice immediately came to mind, and I should have thought of it immediately. Beethoven's Ninth is *the* universal statement of the brotherhood of all mankind and has been accepted as such almost from the time it was written in 1824. Its deeply moving third movement, the monumental, stirring Adagio slow movement, perfectly balances grandness and universality with an intimate human dimension—a musical combination so deeply needed to soothe the souls of all who would be present on that special night in Rome. Beethoven was the answer, of course. But why hadn't I thought of that earlier? It took a nonmusician, the Roman Catholic Pope, to teach that sensitive lesson to his Jewish Maestro.

The rest of the program came much more easily. I knew that I would want the Bruch: Kol Nidre, a wordless setting by a Catholic composer of the most important Jewish prayer from our Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur. The inclusion of this work had a special significance above and beyond the Hebraic origins of its well-known melody. Owing to its composition, Bruch's music was banned by the Nazis. He was presumed to either have been Jewish or to have harbored Jewish sympathies, both of which made him anathema to the National Socialist regime. It was therefore most important that this work be on our program. It was also of special significance that this work had formed a part of our Templ Synagogue concert in 1990, one in which the Pope had played such a vital role.

When the wonderful American cellist Lynn Harrell, whose playing I had admired for so many years, agreed to participate, I was thrilled. Not only is Lynn an extraordinary artist of impeccable musical credentials, but he is also the former student of a Holocaust survivor, Lev Aronson, with whom he had studied in Dallas. Under the guidance of Aronson, Lynn's artistic awakening had been accompanied by a powerful understanding of the connection of musical expression to this greatest of twentieth-century tragedies.

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I was thrilled as well when Richard Dreyfuss agreed to recite the Kaddish as part of a performance of a portion of Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. Three, also subtitled "Kaddish." As Dreyfuss said, he received a thick fax filled with words like Pope, Holocaust, and Kaddish. He read these words, and it dawned on him just what he was being asked to do. He said yes. He knew he could be in no other place that night but with us, and with the watching world, in Rome.

Dreyfuss was considered by some Jewish friends and acquaintances to be a bit of a strange choice. Although born Jewish in Brooklyn, Richard was totally nonobservant. He told me that he had never in fact said Kaddish in a synagogue in his life.

But Richard Dreyfuss, the world-famous, Oscar-winning actor of *Jaws* and *Close Encounters* fame, is also a strong social advocate, a great believer in the power of peace and justice to overcome the might of the sword. Richard may have been unaccustomed to the ritual of reciting this sacred prayer, written as it was in Aramaic, the spoken language of Jesus, but to me he was the perfect person to bring the voice of the "everyman," believer and nonbeliever alike, to the remembrance of the millions of victims of racial hatred. Jews of all religious practice and many of no religious practice at all were murdered by the Nazis, who did not differentiate believer from nonbeliever in their savage rampage. Richard Dreyfuss would represent all Jews, religiously observant or not.

Next, we would perform a last bit of homage to the journey the Pope had led me on, the same setting of Psalm Ninety-two by Franz Schubert that we had performed in Notre Dame Cathedral before Cardinal Lustiger. The Pope's befriending of his Jewish Maestro was in my thoughts in choosing this work for our Shoah concert as well.

I was so pleased to be able to honor Leonard Bernstein. I never forgot his unknowing contribution to the very fact that I became a musician. Without his pitch-perfect advice to my mother, through his private secretary, those many years ago, this concert, and my existence as an artist, would have been utterly different.

Not only would we perform the excerpt from his Kaddish Symphony, then, but also Bernstein's beautiful, lyrical, quintessentially

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American “Chichester Psalms.” These settings of the ancient Davidian texts were in fact written to be performed at the Three Choirs Festival in Chichester Cathedral in England. Bernstein set the Psalms in their original Hebrew, mixing lines of a number of different Psalm texts and in the process creating just the right amalgam of joyful, celebratory prayer and soulful pleading for universal peace. He ends his work with a setting of one of the most important supplications in all the Psalmic canon: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.” (Psalm 133). It would be a perfect ending to our Shoah concert, expressing a sentiment that, if fulfilled, would truly answer the fervent plea of “never again.”

When it came time for the official Vatican announcement of the concert to go out, I was deeply honored when Cardinal Cassidy asked me to pen the words describing our event. The trust that this implied was a deep sign of how far His Eminence and I had come from our first awkward meeting two years before in his offices on the Via del Erbe.

I chose the words with great trepidation, attempting to encompass the immense tragedy that is the Shoah, and the hope that our common endeavor might just bring to our two forever-entwined, brotherly and sisterly faith communities. The official statement of the Vatican’s Commission for the Religious Relations with the Jews of February 15, 1994, read, in part:

The Shoah is a terrible abyss which has thrown a black light on the terrifying depth of human evil. Music, of all the arts, has the capacity to enter directly into the soul, to clarify the inner reaches of the spirit. It is hoped that the music chosen for this Papal concert will bring all who hear it together in remembrance of those horrendous events which must never be forgotten so that they may never be repeated.

April 7, 1994, dawned bright and full of hope.